

Politeness in the Q & A Sessions at an Academic Conference

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1. Introduction

Academic conferences are one of the most important activities in the realm of academia. The structure of a typical academic conference involves a presentation part and an immediate question-and-answer session (hereafter Q & A) which is considered to be more challenging since this part is unrehearsed, and consequently more or less unpredictable (Wulff, Swales, & Keller, 2009). The challenge is more severe when a novice researcher has to respond in a foreign language under the pressure of time limitation (Querol-Julián & Fortanet-Gomez, 2012). Additionally, the sense of difficulty also originated in the fact that presenters' talks were subjected to the audience's evaluation publicly (Webber, 2002). Quite often, negative evaluations, such as disagreement, suspicion, and criticism, are likely to make presenters feel embarrassed, leading to a sense of losing face (Hayashi, 1996).

The notions of indirectness and politeness play a crucial role in the negotiation of 'face' (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Brown & Levinson, 1987) during the realization of speech acts (Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2009). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers tend to use indirect speech to reach compromise and ultimately avoid face threatening acts. The bulk of previous literature on politeness investigated the variety of politeness strategies used under various contexts, and revealed that the choice of politeness strategies was influenced by several factors, including gender (Holmes, 1993; Macaulay, 2001; Mills, 2003), cultural differences (Chen, 1993; Ogiermann, 2009; Yu, 2011), as well as social distance and asymmetrical power relations between interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hatfield & Hahn, 2011; Locher, 2004). Meanwhile, in the context of Q & A sessions at academic conferences, a limited number of studies found that the audience preferred to use indirect speech acts (e.g. indirect questions) to redress the potential imposition of their discourse, so as to preserve presenters' face in front of the public (Anthony, Turk, Yamazaki, & Orr, 2006; Cheng, 2004; Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2009; Kite, 2008).

On the other hand, the majority of existing research has focused on the presentations themselves, without paying attention to the Q & A interactions. This study attempts to investigate the ongoing process of the interactions between presenters and audience from the perspective of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Using recordings of authentic Q & A sessions at an academic conference, the study analyses how interlocutors conduct discussions politely, with particular reference to indirect speech. It also identifies the types of politeness strategies used in these interactions. Given

the important role of indirect speech and politeness theory, a review of essential theoretical frameworks and some relevant empirical studies will be presented in the following section.

2. Literature review

2.1 Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that people are endowed with a public face that they wish to preserve within their everyday social interactions. However, it seems that most people prefer to have their needs of face recognized by others without verbal expressions. Instead, people generally behave as if their face wants will be automatically respected by others. If some actions might be interpreted as a threat to one's expectations of his/her public self-image, then they are regarded as face threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The scholars believed that FTAs consisted of certain speech acts, such as "orders and requests", "suggestions and advice", "reminders", and "treats, warnings, and dares" (p. 66). They further elaborated that the severity of FTA can be evaluated from three dimensions, including (1) the social distance between the interlocutors, (2) their relative power, and (3) the ranking of the imposition in a certain context (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74).

People who display tactful etiquette are commonly considered as decent and polite (Mey, 2001). When dealing with potential FTAs, people can say something to lessen the impositions, and such behaviour is called a face saving act executed under the guidance of politeness strategies (Yule, 1996). Brown and Levinson (1978) outline four different levels of politeness strategies to redress the intensity of FTAs, ranging from the least polite to the most polite. The strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 74) are: (1) Bald on Record, (2) Positive politeness, (3) Negative politeness, (4) Off-record strategies.

Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that the strategy of Bald on Record is a direct way of saying things without any minimization to the imposition, in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way. When applying this strategy, it means that speakers make no attempt to minimize the threat imposed upon other people's face. Brown and Levinson (1987) further outlined the situations where this strategy might be in use, such as situations of task execution which emphasize urgency and efficiency rather than face threat.

A more polite way to deal with FTAs is positive politeness which is directed to the addressee's "perennial desire that his/her wants should be thought of as desirable" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101). Positive politeness affirms that the relationship between group members is friendly. It leads the requester to appeal to a common goal, and even friendship, but it also holds a greater risk for the speaker of suffering a refusal. Speech acts, such as "avoiding disagreement", "giving compliment", and "humor", are examples of how to save one's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 102).

The third strategy proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is negative politeness, which is often

employed under the speaker's assumption that whatever is said would most likely impose on the listener. Methods of saving hearer's negative face involved but are not restricted to indirect speech acts with intended ambiguity, apologetic language for begging forgiveness and pluralize the person responsible (see Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 129–210). The application of such strategy is more appropriate in formal context, due to the recognition of social distance and unbalanced power relationships (Georgakopoulou, 2001).

Doing something off-record, which is Brown and Levinson's (1987) fourth strategy, is based on indirect language (e.g. giving hints, be vague, be ironic or joking) and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing (pp. 211–227). However, using the off-record strategy may lead to unsuccessful communication because the indirectness may easily blur speaker's particular intent and the listener may not become aware of the hints (Yule, 1996).

2.2 Politeness at academic conferences

Academic discourse has received huge attention in the field of pragmatics (Webber, 2002), including presentations at academic conferences. Previous studies include an edited volume by Ventola, Shalom, and Thompson (2002) and many follow-up studies investigating the usage of pronouns in conference presentations (Fernández Polo, 2018; Zareva, 2013) and the multimodality of various types of academic discourse, including presentations (Morell, 2015) and college lectures (Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2004; Lee & Subtirelu, 2015).

Compared to the popularity of presentations as a research topic, *post hoc* Q & A sessions have not attracted equal attention. A strand of such research examined the role of chair's discourse in the discussion sessions. Querol-Julián (2014) identified the two functions of chairs' talk at a specialized conference: discussion management and turn allocation. Furthermore, Shalom (1993) classified a series of speech acts conducted by chairs into finer-grained categories, such as asking questions and making comments (see Shalom, 1993, p. 41 for the full list of categories).

Another strand concentrates on the pragmatic functions of specific speech acts and tries to interpret them in relation to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. For instance, Webber (1997) examined the participants' interaction from a scientific conference with a specific focus on Q & A sessions and identified four types of questions with different functions. She also noticed a few cases in which the audience issued indirect questions as a means of criticizing the previous talk. Later, Webber (2002) analysed recordings of the Q & A sessions of an international medical conference and found that indirect questions (e.g., *I wonder if I may ask*) were commonly used to show politeness. The functions of indirect questions include eliciting information or criticizing the content of the presentations (Webber, 2002, p. 240). Similarly, Kite (2008) examined the interactions between engineers at an academic confer-

ence and identified that indirect questions were used to provide a critique of the current research or suggestions for future study.

Recently, Wulff, Swales and Keller (2009) analysed Q & A sessions by exploring the *John Swales Conference Corpus* (JSCC). The researchers found that questioners used hedging devices (e.g. *I think; kind of; sort of; you know*) as markers of politeness in order to soften the severity of criticism as well as to mitigate the authority of advices offered by the audience who were experts in the field. The authors also confirmed the association between indirectness and politeness in the context of discussion sessions, as well as a tendency of avoiding straightforward utterances.

Meanwhile, previous studies also suggested indirect questions may have other functions. For example, Cheng's (2004) analysis of question in Q & A sessions after public speeches shows that indirect forms (e.g., *I'd like to know*) are sometimes used by questioners to challenge, criticize and even attack speakers. However, such a phenomenon is very rare and most academic related discussions are conducted in a friendly atmosphere, even if scholars failed to achieve mutual agreement on certain issues.

From the above review, it can be understood that existing studies on academic discourse have concentrated heavily on presentations and show much less interest for discussion sessions. Besides, many previous researchers have examined the functions of individual utterances without considering the overall flow of the interactions. Against this background, the present study addresses two research questions: (1) What politeness strategies were used by questioners during Q & A sessions? and (2) How were the functions of indirect questions realized and perceived by interlocutors in interaction?

3. Method and data collection

From the previous literature review, it is clear that indirect speech acts play a crucial part in institutional talk and that a greater understanding of the functions of indirect questions as well as politeness strategies used by speakers in academic discourse is required. With this aim, the data were collected from Q & A sessions after academic presentations given by presenters with various L1 backgrounds at an international conference called '*The 17th Conference of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*' (hereafter, PAAL).

The conference was held in Beijing for three days in August 2012. It comprised over 50 presentations, all related to different sub-fields of applied linguistics. The majority of the presenters were non-native speakers of English. They came from the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. All of them were either graduate students or professors. A smaller group of presenters came from inner-circle English countries (US, UK, New Zealand, Australia). English was the conference language, used by all participants during the presentations and the subsequent Q & A

Table 1 The Q & A corpus

Interaction	Presenter's identity	Questioner's identity	Length of session
1	Chinese PhD Student	Chinese MA student	3 min 16 sec
2	Chinese MA Student	Australian professor	9 min 17 sec
3	Chinese MA Student	Japanese MA student	2 min 32 sec
4	Chinese PhD Student	Chinese PhD student	3 min 29 sec
5	Chinese MA Student	Japanese PhD student	3 min 12 sec
Total	—		21 min 46 sec

sessions. The duration of each presentation was 30 minutes followed by a 10-minute Q & A session.

The data of the Q & A sessions were extracted from longer recordings that include the presentations themselves (not analyzed in this study). The relevant interactions started when the MCs formally announced the end of a presentation and invited the audience to ask questions. They ended after the MC had formally announced the closing of the session. Before recording the sessions, consent was obtained from both the presenters and the audience. As some participants did not wish to be recorded, the sample only consists of 11 Q & A sessions.

The recordings were made using a Sanyo digital audio recorder. Only five of the 11 Q & A sessions have been transcribed because the quality of the remaining six recordings was too poor to be intelligible. Transcription was based on conversation analytic standards developed by Gail Jefferson (also see Liddicoat, 2011, pp. 27-66). For transcription, ELAN was used (<http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>), which is a professional freeware tool developed by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. Notes taken during these sessions were also used for analyzing the data.

Table 1 provides an overview of the corpus. All five presenters were Chinese graduate students who used English as a lingua franca. All interlocutors used English as a common language to communicate during the Q & A sessions. The length of the interactions varies, ranging from as long as almost ten minutes to less than three.

4. Findings and discussion

The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to identify the types of politeness strategies used in the specific context of Q & A sessions at an academic conference. In this section, the findings will be described in detail from the perspective of politeness, supported with authentic examples from the recordings as well as discussion in relation to previous studies. Among the types of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), only two types can be identified: positive politeness strategies (4.1) and negative politeness strategies (4.2). Later on, two extended interactions will be analysed and discussed in relation to politeness in terms of the realization of indirect questions as well as interloc-

utors' perception of them. We will begin with the first type of politeness strategy: positive politeness strategies.

4.1 Positive politeness strategies

The data suggests that positive politeness strategies are frequently used by questioners. Before issuing any questions, questioners commonly express their appreciation and compliments to presenters. Excerpt 1 is a typical example of appreciation issued by a Chinese MA student.

[Excerpt 1] (Q1 = Chinese MA student)

Q1: ahh excuse me (0.3) thank you very much for your presentation [...] so im curious whether those immersion teachers can speak Chinese

In this excerpt, the questioner says *excuse me* first to raise the presenter's attention and then uses tokens *thank you very much* to explicitly express her appreciation to the presenter's previously delivered speech. To mitigate the potential imposition and thus show politeness, the questioner says *I'm curious*. The appreciation token *thank you* used in this example is the most frequently used form in almost all contexts (Webber, 2002). This form is usually followed by adverbials of intensity, such as *very much* and *so much* (Anthony et al., 2006). Same appreciation token is also used by other questioners in the following excerpts, but they expand their appreciation in a more elaborated way.

[Excerpt 3] (Q3 = Japanese MA student)

Q3: thank you emm very much for your informative presentation

In excerpt 3, the questioner uses the same appreciation token *thank you very much* and she expands her appreciation by adding the reason for gratitude with a clause beginning with *for* followed by the exact reason. The questioner in this example also uses a very positive adjective *informative* to intensify her appreciation to the presenter's presentation. Similar examples can be seen in excerpts 2 and 4.

[Excerpt 2] (Q2 = professor)

Q2: thank you for very clear presentation (0.8) which i enjoyed

[Excerpt 4] (Q4 = Chinese PhD student)

Q4: thank you very much for sharing you your presentation (0.8) i found it emm really interesting

Here, in the two excerpts, the patterns of expressing appreciation are even more elaborated and

complex than the previous two examples. In both examples, both questioners said either *thank you* (excerpt 2) or *thank you very much* (excerpt 4). Then, they compliment on the presenters openly by using various adjectives (*clear* in excerpt 2, *interesting* in excerpt 4) to further express their appreciation. At the end of their turns, both questioners state their positive evaluations of the presentations. The questioner in excerpt 2 says *enjoyed* to show his enjoyment of listening to the presenter's speech. Similarly, in excerpt 4, the questioner expands his appreciation by saying *I found it really interesting*.

In all four excerpts listed above, appreciation tokens are used followed by intensifications and reasons of gratitude. Such type of positive politeness strategy can also be found among the university students participated in an academic conference in a study conducted by Anthony et al., (2006), who discovered that questioners routinely express their appreciation to the presenters before moving on to the discussion on certain issues. Based on the above cases, explicitly showing appreciation before asking a question seems to function as a way to save presenters' positive face want, and to consolidate solidarity between questioners and presenters, which echoes Lakoff's (1979) principle of making the addressees feel good (p. 65). Thus, appreciations can be expressed in either a concise way (excerpt 1) or in a more elaborated and detailed manner (excerpts 2, 3 and 4). Having mentioned positive politeness strategy, the subsequent section concerns the negative politeness strategies identified in the Q & A sessions.

4.2 Negative politeness strategies

Apart from positive politeness strategies, questioners in the Q & A sessions also employ a number of negative politeness strategies to save participants' face. First of all, indirect requests were issued for further explanation and clarification. Excerpt 1 is an example of indirect question issued by a questioner for further clarification.

[Excerpt 1] (Q1 = Chinese MA student)

Q1: so im curious whether those immersion teachers can speak Chinese

In this excerpt, the questioner issues an indirect question to invite the presenter to clarify a vague issue that appeared in the preceding presentation, *whether those immersion teachers can speak Chinese*. The examples presented in the following excerpts show a more complicated format for indirect question.

[Excerpt 2] (Q2 = professor)

Q2: what i find myself thinking (0.5) it is is devotion comparable to motivation [...] but i i i just found myself wondering really whether devosh devotion is a factor variable or whether it should be seen as part of motivation

[Excerpt 3] (Q3 = Japanese MA student)

Q3: anyway (0.3) my question is that (0.5) im wondering whether emm their attitudes towards learning English changed (0.3) before taking the courses (0.2) the training and also after the course

[Excerpt 4] (Q4 = Chinese PhD student)

Q4: im not sure whether i understood you correctly (0.5) but i would like to know whether the it was teacher centered or student centered

In the excerpts above, all questioners issue indirect questions to elicit further information from presenters, by using certain hedging devices, such as *I'm wondering* (excerpt 3), *I would like to know* (excerpt 4), *I am curious* (excerpt 1), and *I found myself wondering* (excerpt 2). These hedging devices have taken on the function of mitigating the potential imposition of criticism and disagreement, as well as to redress the coerciveness in demanding a response (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 56). Similar observations have been made in a number of previous studies on indirectness in questions, all of which illustrate interlocutors' preference for using indirect questions to show politeness (e.g. Anthony et al., 2006; Kite, 2008; Webber, 2002).

4.3 Different perceptions of the function of indirect requests

Having analyzed politeness strategies used by interlocutors on an utterance level, this section will highlight how politeness strategies are realized and perceived by interlocutors in interaction. Below is an example of an exchange between a female Chinese PhD student (P1) studying at a university in mainland China and a female Chinese MA student (Q1) who was studying in a Japanese university. English was a foreign language to both interlocutors. The excerpt is only a segment of the complete interaction. The last line of the extract does not constitute the end of the interaction. After the presenter's brusque reply, a professor who was the presenter's supervisor joined the discussion and provided a more elaborated answer.

[Excerpt 5]: Indirect request for clarification

Q1 (Chinese MA students), P1 (Chinese PhD student)

- 1 Q1 ahh excuse me (0.3)
- 2 thank you very much for your presentation i' v a (0.2) tiny
- 3 little ehm (0.6) question ahm (0.1) you said during your
- 4 presentation that de native speakers are (0.2) are native
- 5 english speaker,

- 6 P1 yahh
 7 Q1 an [deh
 8 P1 [and de from de next season we will ah (immersion camp)
 9 Q1 okay (0.4) ehm but ehm (0.9) according to some authors
 10 (0.2) they said that in immersion settings in immersion
 11 programs (0.2) em some of the immersion programs require
 12 that their teachers should be bilingual
 13 (0.7)
 14 Q1 they=
 15 P1 =in that emh class they can talk in english
 16 Q1 ah [em
 17 P1 [it is immersion class
 18 Q1 yes i i i know it's immersion campus but some of the
 19 programs require that their teachers should be bilingual they
 20 have they should have some proficiency of the (0.3) ahm
 21 students ahm native language so im curious whether those
 22 immersion teachers can speak chinese
 23 P1 no they cannot

In the interaction above, Q1 intends to issue a question to clarify a certain point from lines 2 to 5. However, Q1 uses the tokens *okay* and *ehm* (line 9), which can be regarded as signs of a dispreferred action (Stokoe, 2008, p. 296) to show her disagreement with the presenter (Hüttner, 2014). In lines 9 to 12 and lines 18 to 22, Q1 provides some additional information about previous research in order to elaborate her question. Finally, in lines 21 and 22, Q1 successfully issues a question to ask for what she really wants to know, whether the teachers know the immersion students' first language. In line 23, P1 finally produces an answer, which was rather short and without any further explanation.

In Extract 5, Q1 uses various strategies to make her question more polite. First, she begins with a token of appreciation *thank you very much* (line 2) which is a type of positive politeness strategy. She then uses the modifying adjectives *tiny* and *little* (lines 2 to 3) to show her modesty and reassures the presenter that her question is neither harsh nor difficult, which can be regarded as a type of positive strategy, too. Q1 uses tokens of hedging, such as *okay* and *ehm* (line 9), to indirectly show her disagreement with the presenter. A similar example of hedging (*I'm curious whether*) can also be seen in Q1's last turn, where she finally initiates her question. Such tokens of hedging to acknowledge dispreferred actions serve as a negative politeness strategy to mitigate potential imposition. Thus, in this extract the

questioner utilizes both positive and negative politeness strategies to make her question more polite.

Of further note is that Q1's utterances contain many pauses (lines 1 to 5, and lines 9 to 12) and repetitions of tokens (*ahm, eh*) that indicate the questioner's hesitation. One likely reason for this is that she anticipates that her question may easily be taken as a criticism by P1 and therefore endeavors to get it across as softly as possible.

In stark contrast to Q1's long question, P1's response is quite unusual in its brevity. This might reveal that P1 does not like the question, because she understands it as a general criticism of the idea of immersion. Perhaps this is also the reason why she prematurely interrupts Q1 two times. Later on, a professor from the same university jumps in to help the presenter out.

From the interaction, it seems that the presenter and the questioner interpret the function of the indirect request differently. Q1 intends to use an indirect question to invite the presenter to join the discussion about the required qualification of immersion teachers. Such behavior might originate in the belief that expressing criticism and disagreement with lecturers is not considered to be highly face-threatening; rather addressees treat these as a way to show academic competence and enthusiasm for learning (Nakane, 2006). Unfortunately, it seems that P1 is not "in the mood" for discussion since she interrupts Q1 twice during the interaction. P1 prematurely attempts to initiate an answer *from the next season we will* (line 8) which seems to be irrelevant to Q1's question. Then, P1 interrupts Q1 again and provides some clarification on the matter: *they can talk in English* (line 15), and *it is immersion class* (line 17). In the end, P1 decides to treat the question as a simple request of factual information by producing a very short answer *no they cannot* (line 23). Such short answers can be interpreted as a sign of reluctance to continue further discussion. Besides, P1's responses to criticism is very different from the results of Wulff et al., (2009) which discovered a pattern of thanking questioners (e.g. *thanks for bringing this up*) followed by elaborated talks. Rather than expressing mutual appreciation to Q1, P1 tries to provide a possible answer directly. Such discrepancy confirms P1's negative perception towards Q1's question and further illustrates individual difference on interpreting the function of indirect request. Q1 treats the question as a device of invitation to further discussion, whereas P1 takes it as a regular question which only requires factual information.

Another example of an interaction involving indirect questions is presented in Excerpt 6. Here, a female Chinese graduate student (P2) interacts with a male college professor (Q2), Professor Edmond (pseudonym) who is a native speaker of English, and he is one of the keynote speakers of the conference.

[Excerpt 6]: Indirect request of offering disagreement

Q2 (Chinese MA students), P2 (Professor, native speaker of English)

- 1 Q2 thank you for very clear presentation (0.8)
 2 which i enjoyed (1.1) aahmm(1.6) what i find myself
 3 thinking (0.5) it is devotion comparable to motivation
 4 (0.8) cause if you look at the definitions of motivation
 5 (0.9) they include all the reasons for doing something like
 6 learning a language (0.9) but they also include effort (0.7)
 7 you going look they at ahm (0.4) ahm greg's define
 8 standard definition of motivation [in 1985 is basically=
 9 P2 [yeah
 10 Q2 =orientations and attitudes (0.4) yeah? (0.3) or reasons if
 11 you like (0.4) and then plus effort (0.9) and it seems to me
 12 that devotion, (0.9) is a word that is a synonymous to
 13 effort
 14 P2 (yes)
 15 Q2 so devotion is perhaps not separable, (0.4) but really part
 16 of motivation (0.4) and another way of looking at what you
 17 are doing (0.3) is to separate out the two aspects of
 18 motivation (0.6) which are thee (0.3) the reasons that you
 19 have in learning a language (0.3) yeah? (0.3) your
 20 pre-actional (0.6) em ahm effort and your looking at the
 21 relationship between those two aspects of motivation (0.4)
 22 and obtaining separate measures (0.7) but i i i just found
 23 myself wondering really whether devosh devotion is a
 24 factor variable or whether it should be seen as part of
 25 motivation
 26 (2.4)
 27 P2 well thank you professor edmond(0.3) ahm (0.5) i think
 28 that ahm (0.8) the purpose of [...]

Here, in excerpt 6, Q2 expresses his appreciation (lines 1 to 2), followed by two long pauses which can be seen as a preparation for a dispreferred action (Hayashi, 1996). Then Q2 launches an indirect speech act *what I find myself thinking is devotion comparable to motivation* (lines 2 to 3) to indicate that he has a different view. He is very careful and uses an indirect question rather than just saying '*you are wrong*'. He goes on by referring to some part of the previous presentation. Then Q2 further elaborates on the

reason for his disagreement (lines 10 to 13). He closes his turn with a more elaborated and articulate indirect question *but I just found myself wondering really whether devotion is a factor variable or whether it should be seen as part of motivation* (lines 22 to 25) that clearly calls for a response. Then after a quite long time of preparation, P2 finally initiates an answer. After thanking Q2 for his comments *well thank you professor edmond* (line 27), P2 continues to answer Q2's question.

Excerpt 6 presents one example of how a questioner uses indirect questions to express disagreement. The use of indirectness is motivated by the questioner's effort to save the presenter's negative face of not being imposed on as well as his own positive face want of consolidating solidarity. Instead of displaying his differing viewpoint aggressively by literally throwing a question at her (lines 2 to 8 and lines 15 to 25), Q2 presents his disagreement in a soft self-reflective way, almost as though he is merely thinking aloud, using such expressions as *what I found myself thinking* (lines 2 to 3) and *just found myself wondering* (lines 21 to 22). This softening mechanism to save the presenter's negative face again can be easily interpreted in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and their strategy "be indirect" (p. 132).

As to the presenter's interpretation of the disagreement embedded in the indirect requests, her reaction is in line with the patterns used to react to criticism during discussion discovered by Wulff et al., (2009). It seems that P2 reacts quite positively to Q2's criticism by thanking him and actively initiates more utterances to address the questioner's concern.

Similar to the interaction from Excerpt 5, Excerpt 6 also contains many longer pauses. The large amount of silence here suggests some considerable cognitive effort by the questioner developing his question, indicating that the formation of polite utterances requires time (Butterworth, 1975). Apparently, it is challenging for speakers to develop questions in short time while simultaneously taking politeness towards the presenter into consideration to choose the appropriate words.

My analysis of the two longer interactions reveals that the questioners' preference for indirect requests seems to be motivated by the realization of presenters' negative face wants. In the two examples, the questioners use indirect questions to show their recognition of the presenters' negative face wants (the desire not to be imposed upon) and redress the questions with softening mechanisms to ensure that the presenter will not feel pressured into facing disagreement. These indirect questions, which are oriented to the presenters' negative face, tend to show deference and emphasize the importance of the questioners' concerns. Indirect questions are used by questioners to skillfully articulate elaborate question turns, enabling them to hold the floor in order to obtain clarification (excerpt 5) and show disagreement (excerpt 6). Thus, in order to minimize the threat and to avoid the risk of losing face on both parties, there seems a preference for indirectness on the part of the askers to smooth the conversational interaction.

Apart from the variation in individual perception, there also seem to be differences in the power relationship between the two parties, which may lead to different use of politeness strategies and different types of responses by the presenters. In the excerpt 5, P1 as a PhD candidate is older than Q1, who is an MA student, and she holds a tenured position with higher social status. Perhaps P1 might be fully aware such unbalanced power relationship between Q1 and herself, thus takes Q1's polite actions for granted and behaves less politely to Q1 by frequent interruptions and short responses. On the other hand, excerpt 6 shows a reversed power relationship pattern, that Q2 as an elderly and famous professor in the research field holds a far more prominent position than P2, an MA student. However, Q2 tried his best to preserve P2's face by utilizing various types of politeness strategies, including appreciation, compliment, indirect question and hedging devices. P2, who also seems to recognise the severely unbalanced relationship, listens to Q2 carefully when P2 is talking without interruption, and she is willing to continue further discussion after Q2 finishes his turn.

Even though the indirect questions from Excerpts 5 and 6 do seem to be intended to challenge the presenters and to show disagreement, they cannot be considered impolite. In fact, the questioners use these questions to show their interests in the presentations as well as to provide the presenters with opportunities to make their arguments more convincing. By asking questions and using tokens of acknowledgement, questioners also successfully satisfy addressees' positive face want of obtaining positive reactions from the audience. The action of asking questions also reveals that questioners do care about the presenters' feelings and wants. In both Excerpts 5 and 6, the questioners choose the strategies of "Notice, attend to H (interest, wants, needs, goods)" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 103) and "Intensify interest to H" to minimize the face risk and embarrassment (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 106). Obviously, if a presenter finishes his/her presentation, a positive politeness action for the speaker to take is to ask questions or offer comments to show their interest in it rather than remain silent.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed that interlocutors used both positive and negative politeness strategies to show politeness when conducting Q & A sessions at an academic conference. Questioners employed expressions of appreciation and compliments to maintain the positive face of the presenters, and they utilized indirect requests to save the presenters' negative face of not being imposed. The results support Wulff et al., (2009) and Webber's (2002) claim that interlocutors applied various types of face-saving strategies to maintain politeness.

The present study has a number of limitations. One is that its scope is very narrow, with only five interactions in total. Needless to say, such small data size does not allow for generalizations of the

current findings to different contexts, and are in fact not even representative of this one academic conference. Rather, they should be taken as exemplary indicators of the behaviors of participants in academic conferences when engaging in discussions with presenters. In the future, studies should employ a larger number of Q & A sessions and examine speech act patterns of questions. In addition, examining a larger corpus may shed light on the issue of socioculturally related impacts on the speech act behavior of questioning. Furthermore, more studies are needed to examine prosodic aspects of politeness such as intonation or pitch of polite utterances, and these should also be incorporated into extended analysis. Finally, future studies need to investigate differing uses of questions and follow-up responses in relation to the power relationship between interlocutors in the settings of academic discourse.

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